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ABSTRACT

Among the elements of the press most active in the "dry-wet" prohibition debate in the 1920s and early 1930s, was "Literary Digest," a weekly current affairs review. In addition to its regular impartial coverage of the week's actions relevant to prohibition, the "Digest" contributed three national straw polls on the issue. A review of these polls, which were conducted in 1922, 1930, and 1932, reveals that they were influential in structuring people's perceptions about the prohibition issue. Combined with the heavy and cumulatively negative press coverage that the subject received and with defects in governmental policy concerning it, the polls contributed to the creation of a climate of opinion in which repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment became a practical possibility. (FL)

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History Division

LITERARY DIGEST POLLS AND THE "DRY-WET" DEBATE, 1922-1932

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LITERARY DIGEST POLLS AND THE "DRY-WET" DEBATE, 1922-1932

A new day is dawning, triumphant prohibition forces joyously proclaimed as the effective date of the Eighteenth Amendment approached. The Anti-Saloon League of America issued this statement on January 15, 1920:

> It is here at last--dry America's first birthday. At one minute past twelve tomorrow morning a new nation will be born.... Tonight John Barleycorn makes his last will and testament. Now for an era of clear thinking and clean living! The Anti-Saloon League wishes every man, woman, and child a happy Dry Year.[1]

Prohibition, the "great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose," as Herbert Hoover later described it, had arrived, launching the American people into a period of protracted public debate. The national policy of prohibition became, Chicago Mayor William E. Dever stated in 1926, "our most discussed and disturbing domestic question."[2]

A major portion of the credit (or blame) for prohibition's being for so long a matter of public debate belongs to the nation's newspaper and periodical press. Throughout the prohibition period (1920-1933), it received saturation coverage. One observer, describing the "national obsession" with prohibition, has noted:

> The people talked of little else. Books and pamphlets rolled off the presses by the thousands. It was a rare magazine which didn't publish at least one article about it in every issue. The newspapers were filled with it; one New York paper alone printed almost 17,000 prohibition items in eight years, and a large proportion were on the front pages.[3]

Among the most active periodicals was Literary Digest, which in 1920 was a 30-year-old weekly current affairs review. Typically, the Digest covered the issue in the manner depicted in a newspaper editorial cartoon of 1922,

Captioned "You Pay Your Money and Take Your Choice," the cartoon from the Brooklyn Citizen shows a man looking at an open issue of Literary Digest. On the left page is a diminuitive prohibition foe; on the right, a similar prohibition supporter, each stating his position to the reader:

> [Says the "Wet":] Don't listen to him. I can prove by statistics that since the 18th Amendment there has been more crime and drunkeness and contempt for law than ever before in our country's history.
> [Says the "Dry":] I've got the statistics to prove that since the country went dry there is less crime and poverty and our glorious land is more moral, prosperous and law abiding than every before.[4]

But Literary Digest's major contribution to the debate on prohibition was a series of national straw polls on the issue in 1922, 1930 and 1932. These polls, as well as other issue polls the magazine conducted between 1916 and 1936, are less widely known than its presidential election straw polls, particularly its 1936 poll. For that one, in which it unhesitatingly declared its poll results showed Alf Landon would soundly beat Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Digest secured for itself the dubious honor of eternal citation as the producer of "the classic example of unscientific polling."[5] However, the prohibition polls were bigger news in their day than the presidential polls. They became the subject of extensive coverage and comment during the time when prohibition was such a major issue on the public agenda. Indeed, except for the 1936 presidential poll, they were perhaps the biggest stories in the magazine's 48 years of publication.

These straw polls on prohibition in the context of the "Dry-Wet" debate of the 1920s and early 1930s are the subject of this paper, which offers an assessment of their role in shaping the debate and its outcome. Details of the polls and their place in the debate are presented, along with a description of the extensive coverage and comment they received. The impact of the

polls and of the coverage they received is examined, with the aid of contemporaneous assessments and those of later scholars, in the context of a discussion of the impact of polls and media. All of this is preceded by a summary of the Digest's history, editorial formula and reputation and its experience with straw polls.

BACKGROUND: THE "DEPENDABLE AND IMPARTIAL RECORDER"

Literary Digest made its debut in March 1890 and ceased publication in February 1938, during which time "it achieved a unique place in U. S. journalism," Time stated in reporting the Digest's takeover by Time, Inc. Frank Luther Mott judged it to have been "a dependable and impartial recorder of public opinion as expressed in the press, as well as a repository of digests of, and extracts from, current informational literature."[6] It was published by Funk and Wagnalls, whose founders were two former Lutheran ministers, Isaac K. Funk and Adam Wagnalls. They intended their new publication to be especially useful to educators and clergymen, for whom it would be "a repository of contemporaneous thought and research as presented in the periodical literature of the world."[7] Its early emphasis, notes Daniel Boorstin, was "emphatically highbrow" but by the early twentieth century its content "had come down to the level of the newspaper reader."[8] It was largely the above average newspaper reader who subscribed to the Digest, however. In an analysis of its subscribers published in 1922, the Digest reported that 73 percent of them were owners, officials and executives in business and industry or were in the professions. It described its readership as constituting "one of the largest groups of intelligent and affluent persons in the United States whose opinions and buying habits are influenced by one publication." In 1930, the Digest observed that its readers "are universally recognized as a group of especially alert and intelligent people, whose judgment on any question is

well worth listening to." Arthur E. Bostwick, science editor for nearly 40 years, observed, "In general, the Digest proceeded on the assumption that its readers were persons of education, and that such persons do not wish to be treated as know-nothings."[9]

Under the leadership of William Seaver Woods, editor from 1905 to 1933, and Robert J. Cuddihy, publisher from 1905 to 1937, the Digest by the 1920s was firmly established as a national institution with a "secure place in the confidence and esteem of the people."[10] Its circulation went over one million in 1921 and by 1930 was averaging more then two million per week.[11] Further, its integrity was seen to be unassailable. The Philadelphia North American stated in 1922:

> The character of the Literary Digest is too firmly established to permit the slightest suspicion that it would act in bad faith or suspend observance of its high standard of editorial integrity.[12]

A large part of its reputation was earned by the magazine's consistent policy of impartiality, "the neutrality which is its guiding star."[13] In one of the numerous references it made to its code of conduct during the polls on prohibition, the Digest declared:

> It is the Digest's policy, of course, to let the weekly summary of votes speak for itself, as other facts and opinions are permitted to speak for themslves through these pages.[14]

This characteristic of the Digest was noted by Henry Luce and Britton Hadden in their prospectus for a new weekly magazine in 1922: "The Digest, in giving both sides of a question, gives little or no hint as to which side it considers to be right."[15] The "on the one hand; on the other hand" treatment of current affairs was not for them, but it served the Digest well for many years. Today, one historian has noted, its content and its editorial formula of "thoughtful reporting and conscientious samplings from other news media make it an

invaluable source for all aspects of public life" in its time.[16]

Its time, however, began running out in the 1930s. Circulation dipped below one million in 1933 and continued to decline. At its end in 1938, the Digest's subscriptions totalled 250,000. After a series of unsuccessful efforts to revive the fading magazine, Funk and Wagnalls sold it to the Review of Reviews Corporation in June 1937. It emerged on July 17, 1937, as The Digest, subtitled Review of Reviews Incorporating Literary Digest. New owners in November 1937 revived the old name, and the Literary Digest suspended publication in February 1938. Three months later one of the singular ironies of magazine history occurred when Time, Inc., purchased for $25,000 the "name, goodwill, and unfilled subscriptions" of its venerable competitor. Most of the 250,000 subscribers accepted Time as a substitute subscription, and the action helped ease Time's circulation problems.[17] The Digest's "rapid descent from unusual popularity to virtual extinction," wrote Arthur Bostwick, "is unexampled, as far as I know."[18]

THE DIGEST AND STRAW POLLS

Competition from Time and other news magazines had contributed to the Digest's troubles in the 1930s, as had the Depression. The 1936 poll was but the final blow to a tottering, punch-drunk publication.[19] But what a spectacular blow! It became one of the biggest stories of the 1936 election. It also ended "twenty years of popular interest and the development of some faith in the 'Digest polls,'" one observer has noted.[20] In polling history, the most important contribution of the 1936 fiasco was the stimulus it gave to wider interest in scientific public opinion polls and to acceptance of the value of scientific polling.[21] One other effect, of course, was to ensure continuing historical interest in the Literary Digest polls over the years from 1916 to

1936. Ironically, it had been the publicity given the Digest's nationwide efforts that had stimulated widespread public interest in straw polls during the 1920s and early 1930s, when the magazine's name became "almost synonymous with straw polls."[22] As one eminent scholar stated:

> For two decades the Literary Digest, more than any other agency or publication in the United States, interested millions of readers in straw polls. Sometimes their predictive accuracy was high, as in the 1932 election when they made one of the best forecasts in the history of polling. Their blunderbuss methods could not always fail, but the method was obviously fallacious in many respects. However, the historian of polling must note that the Digest did arouse a widespread public interest which was inherited and quickly expanded by the new polling researchers working for the newspapers, periodicals, private interest-groups, distributive agencies and government agencies. The Digest polls centered the attention of many statistical and other experts on the problems of polling.... The Digest polls were a protracted stage in the development of straw polls. They were superseded by more exact, but by no means invariably accurate, sampling methods.[23]

The Digest's were not the first journalistic straw polls, but they became the most renowned.[24] "So great is the interest in a Literary Digest poll," one scholar wrote in 1932, "that the American press uses literally thousands of column inches in reporting their straw returns."[25]

Actually, these straw polls were simply an outgrowth of what had been part of the magazine's editorial formula almost from the start. From its early days, it had taken upon itself the job of surveying the state of the nation's opinion on various public issues, principally by monitoring the nation's press, but also by surveying newspaper editors. By means of straw polls, the Digest went directly to the people to assess public opinion. The scale of the assessment was considerably larger, and the major polls were done only in presidential election years or done only on a few issues, prohibition most often, but the basic editorial purpose behind straw polls was the same as that behind the

Digest's normal public affairs coverage.

Beyond this, however, was another, more important, consideration: the promotional value of such major undertakings as these nation-wide polls of tens of millions. In 1924, when a congressman questioned the honesty of the presidential poll in that year and suggested partisan interests (Republican) were footing the bill, editor William Seaver Woods replied:

> The Congressman wants to know who is paying our bill for this straw vote. The answer is that the bill is paid by the Literary Digest. It is a business proposition. Attached to each post card sent for balloting is a subscription blank for the magazine. The returns in subscriptions have been enormous, and they have paid the expenses of the poll.[26]

Questions about the cost of the polls and who might be paying them came up frequently. The reply was always the same, as in 1932;

> The Digest finances its own polls. Yes, the outlay is very large, indeed. But we have always found that the stimulating effect on circulation, plus the stimulating experience of doing a big public service in a big way, more than compensates us.[27]

For the Digest the gain was not only in the direct, immediate subscription orders the polling generated. It gained immeasurable public recognition by the linking of its name with an issue of high public interest. "Everybody is talking," the Christian Advocate stated in July 1922, "about the results of the mail vote on Prohibition with which the Literary Digest is ruffling the calmness of the 'strike summer'...."[28] The debate that invariably arose over the poll itself also benefitted the Digest by further drawing attention to it, and the magazine revelled in it. It referred to the phenomenon of "the good old cross-fire of accusation which belongs to the atmosphere of a Digest poll and without which it would not have a homelike feeling."[29] Further, each effort enhanced its image as an impartial monitor of the current scene, interested only in the "unhampered expression of popular opinion" and performing its

public service with "the neutrality which is its guiding star even through the Armageddon on a Prohibition poll."[30] By 1932, the magazine was speaking of itself as if it were a quasi-governmental institution. "The United States Government can not very well do it. Very well, the Literary Digest will do it." It noted there is no provision in the Constitution for a national referendum, but, even if there were, it would be too costly and cumbersome. "In a few swift weeks, however, a Literary Digest poll can canvass the entire nation, from sea to sea, reaching every city, town and hamlet in every state in our great Union."[31]

In the public mind at large, the Digest polls also had the virtue of being accurate in their reports of public opinion. On innumerable occasions, the magazine proudly referred to its "historically prophetic polls" and their "uncanny accuracy." Walter Lippmann noted in 1928, "The popular impression is now pretty well settled...that the Digest poll is a virtually infallible forecast of the result of a national election."[32] A self-styled "Dry" wrote in a letter to the editor of the New York Times, in which he criticized "Dry" leaders for urging a boycott of the Digest poll:

> I do not speak for the Literary Digest, nor shall I attempt to defend its poll. They need no defense. The accuracy and impartiality of the Literary Digest's nation-wide polls have been so thoroughly demonstrated in the past dozen years that those who have tried to discredit them have, in the end, only brought discredit upon themselves.[33]

Hundreds of other testimonials can be found in the pages of Literary Digest, which never hesitated to publicly pat itself on the back by using the words of others.

The general view at that time was that the Digest's system of mailing out tens of millions of ballots to persons whose names were in telephone directories and on automobile registration lists--its "tel-auto public," as Claude

Robinson labelled it--was one of its chief virtues. Though unsophisticated by modern polling standards, this "blunderbuss" method, to use William Albig's term, was viewed as generously allowing a wide segment of the American public the opportunity to be heard. Its refusal to change its method was often applauded, as in this statement by the Brockton (Mass.) Enterprise:

> Using a system which in previous national polls, against criticism most scathing, revealed public opinion with extraordinary accuracy, the Literary Digest has declined to change, amplify, or modify it. Common sense and fairness approve the magazine's firmness in this respect.[34]

This system grew out of long-standing marketing practices of Funk and Wagnalls and Literary Digest. Direct-mail solicitations to prospective subscribers and purchasers of the firm's books and other published material were an integral part of Funk and Wagnalls's way of doing business. Names of these prospective customers were compiled and kept on file starting in 1895.

> As first compiled, the list was made up largely of the names of professional people, lawyers, architects, physicians, engineers, club members, and so on. In 1895, it numbered 350,000 names. By 1900, the mailing list had grown to 685,000. At the present time [1932] the circularization list of the Literary Digest includes the enormous number of 20,000,000 names.[35]

Starting in 1924, the names were gathered largely from telephone directories and automobile registration files, Robinson states, "these being more available than any other [sources], and comprising a market in which published matter can be most readily sold." In relating the capabilities and experience of the firm in this matter, he states:

> Between 1915 and 1924 the magazine mailed the stupendous number of 162,000,000 circulars to prospective readers of Literary Digest publications. A conservative estimate reaching to 1932 would place this figure at about 35,000,000. The efficiency with which this task is dispatched is attested to by the fact that only 1.3 percent of the mail matter sent from the offices of the magazine is found to be undeliverable by the post office.[36]

But the commercial virtue of this system, from the publishers' point of view, detracted from its value as a way to achieve a reliable measurement of public sentiment on candidates and issues. By distributing its ballots to owners of automobiles and persons with telephones, because they were potential subscribers and customers, it was using a sample that was unrepresentative of the nation at large. Moreover, the business need of obtaining a wide distribution of its solicitations led the firm to the use of a mass mailing, the response rate to which is always relatively low, when interviewing of a carefully selected representative sample would have been better from a scientific point of view. As a result, several biases were built into the Literary Digest sample, and these had serious potential or actual consequences for the reliability of its results. Robinson's analysis in 1932 found that the sample was biased in favor of Republicans, men, urban area residents, and persons with the economic means to afford a telephone or car.[37] These biases caused the Digest to consistently overpredict the Republican vote in its presidential election polls and to overstate the "Wetness" of public sentiment in its prohibition polls, according to Robinson. In 1936, the consequences of the Digest system were fully realized, and the famous Digest poll was discredited.[38] The consequences of the flawed system in regard to the prohibition polls will be discussed below.

POLLS ON PROHIBITION

The lead article in the July 8, 1922, issue of Literary Digest proclaimed the start of "the greatest and most representative unofficial canvass ever undertaken in the history of the United States," a "hugh poll" of 10,000,000 persons on "those two most pressing questions of the day--the status of the Prohibition Amendment and the proposal to pay a Federal bonus to all American

soldiers and sailors who wore a uniform in the World War." The magazine confidently predicted that the poll "will reveal the will of the American people" regarding those questions. The bonus part of the poll quickly took a back seat to the prohibition question. The Digest gave the latter top billing from the start, noting: "Startling revelations of the true state of the country's attitude toward Prohibition may be predicted on the basis of the ballots already received."[39] The "innocent citizen" of Frederick Lewis Allen's 1920s might have found the whole concept to be startling. "The Eighteenth Amendment, he had been assured and he firmly believed, had settled the prohibition issue. You might like it or not, but the country was going dry."[40] Indeed, by July 1922 it had been officially "dry" for more than two years. Why was it necessary to conduct a "hugh poll?"

As innocent citizen soon learned, the prohibition amendment had not made the liquor question a dead issue. Instead, it became the "most violently explosive public issue of the 1920s."[41] It was into this setting that the Literary Digest jumped headlong with what turned out to be the first of three nation-wide straw polls on prohibition. It was, the Digest stated, providing "the first opportunity ever given to the citizens of the United States to take part in a nation-wide vote on Prohibition."[42] And for undertaking the task, it earned high praise from journalistic commentators. A New York Times writer noted:

> Convincing evidence of the unsettled state of the public mind on this question is to be found in the newspaper reaction to the announcement of the Literary Digest's project to take a nation-wide straw vote of 10,000,000 ballots. It provoked comments in all sections....If these [some hundreds of] editorials can be accepted as representative...of the editorial opinion of the nation, the newspaper verdict seems to have been almost unanimous that the Literary Digest "is performing a valuable public service" and that the result of the poll will be "a trustworthy measure of sentiment,"

> a number of newspapers suggesting that the returns "will be extremely valuable to some of the politicians," that "Congressmen will study them long and carefully."[43]

This initial press greeting of the Digest's prohibition poll was only a modest forerunner of the kind of coverage it would receive with its later polls. The New York Times, for example, gave the Digest's polls in 1930 and 1932 almost daily coverage. The Digest proudly took note of this kind of coverage and the editorial comments its efforts were receiving. It usually reprinted excerpts from a selection of editorials each week, some of them at great length. Noting the "wonderful press" it had been receiving in 1930, the Digest declared:

> It would be hard to recall a case--and this is another proof of the dominance of Prohibition in the public mind--in which any enterprise, public or private, has had so much newspaper and magazine space lavished on it continuously for any such period as eleven weeks, or has been the theme of such animated editorial discussion. The reports and comments upon it would make an interesting five-foot shelf....The press of the whole country, in generously recognizing the poll's news value and its rank as an important public service, has helped to make it a success. Yes, and even the comparatively small hostile section of the press has done its bit toward stimulating the interest and the balloting.[44]

The Digest's own media ballyhoo also helped. In addition to giving itself extensive coverage in its own pages--at least 46 articles total in the three poll periods--and boosting itself with newspaper advertising, the Digest had radio commentators Floyd Gibbons (1930) and Lowell Thomas (1932) providing nightly summaries of results on coast-to-coast radio hook-ups. Gibbons, his famous white eyepatch in place, was given prominent display in a 1930 issue with a centered quarterpage photo on the first page of the editorial section. The caption read:

> FLOYD GIBBONS AT HIS NIGHTLY RENDEZVOUS With you--and you--and you! In fact, with the bulk of the American people, to whom he brings the latest news of the Digest Prohibition poll, and much spicy gossip of the wide, wide world.

The article also carries a lengthy excerpt from a New York Evening Telegram story about Gibbons, which quotes his opening of one broadcast:

> "Hello, everybody! Prepare for the hottest news of this hottest national issue--Prohibition! I just breezed up from the Literary Digest counting-rooms, and, boy, it's almost too hot for me to handle. Get a load o' these latest returns from the capital of the national Sahara, Birmingham--"[45]

The Digest capped its straw votes on prohibition in 1932 with characteristically florid descriptions of their value and impact and of the intense interest that had developed:

> Gusts of dry-wet activity in both big parties have turned a glare of flash-lights on the accumulating figures of the Digest's monster straw vote.
>
> An air of urgency prevails.
>
> Robins, crocuses, and Presidential conventions are practically around the corner, and the dry-wet problem is on the carpet in both parties.
>
> The strategists of Washington are astir....
>
> Many signs of the times...seem to indicate that the Digest was well guided in choosing these early months of this fateful year for another and greater Prohibition poll, which could be the greatest straw vote in history.[46]

The final report for 1932 elaborates on that theme:

> The last mail-bags have been emptied on the inspection tables. The last ballots have been tallied to a dot....
>
> This puts the capstone on the vast plebiscite that has had the whole country buzzing for three months.
>
> During these three months the Eighteenth Amendment itself has been winning an even larger and more poignant share of attention from the men and women of America, their leaders and legislators, not forgetting various presidential aspirants....
>
> [All the activity] shows how timely is the publication of this final report. In an unforgettable year of public anxiety, controversy, and political ferment, but also of courage and hope, the Digest offers this Prohibition poll to the nation as a rounded contribution to the sum of public knowledge concerning the undercurrents of national opinion and sentiment on this vital issue.

> The poll now becomes history. A symmetrical edifice of statistical data, built for the whole nation, and not for any party or cause, we dedicate it simply and sincerely to service in the search for wisdom by public men in their councils and conventions, their legislatures and executive mansions, at this crisis of the nation's life. If our offering is nothing else, it is a reflection of one special aspect of truth, as faithfully garnered as we, with much experience and good-will, could do the job.[47]

The Digest's "symmetrical edifice of statistical data" showed a strong vote for repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1932, 73.5 percent. (Complete figures for all three polls are given in Table 1.) The following year, 21,000,000 votes were cast in the various states for delegates to state conventions to vote on the Twenty-first Amendment, which repealed the prohibition amendment. Of those votes, 72.9 percent went to pro-repeal delegates. The trend was clear throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, the Literary Digest's polls and numerous other polls and surveys showed: an ever-growing dissatisfaction with the Volstead Act, at first, then with prohibition itself. Given the chance for a clear "Yes-No" vote in 1932, the Digest's respondents overwhelmingly chose "No."

THE IMPACT

"The effect of a straw vote on Prohibition," the Louisville Times, a "Dry" newspaper, asserted in 1926, "is a week of headlines and a spasm of comment. That's all."[48] Although prohibition supporters occasionally welcomed the straw polls as means for showing how much support there was for prohibition and for motivating their followers,[49] their general view was that straw polls on prohibition were, at the least, meaningless. Official referenda on state laws and elections in which the "Dry-Wet" issue was involved were the meaningful exercises.[50] "Drys" were advised not to participate in meaningless straw polls.

TABLE 1

RESULTS OF LITERARY DIGEST STRAW POLLS ON PROHIBITION: 1922, 1930, 1932

	1922	1930	1932
Enforcement	356,193 (38.6%)	1,464,098 (30.5%)	1,236,660 (26.5%)*
Modification	376,334 (40.8%)	1,399,314 (29.1%)	**
Repeal	189,856 (20.6%)	1,943,052 (40.4%)	3,431,877 (73.5%)
Totals	922,383	4,806,464	4,668,537
Sent Out	10,108,437	20,227,370	20,706,352
Response	9.1%	23.8%	22.5%

Sources: Literary Digest, 9 September 1922, p. 11; 24 May 1930, pp. 7-8; 30 April 1932, pp. 6-7

*On ballot as Continuance.

**Not on ballot.

Besides, they drew attention away from the real need, which was to more effectively enforce the Volstead Act. In a bitter account published ten years after repeal, Ernest Gordon commented:

> What was needed above all was quiet to organize effective enforcement. To prevent this referenda were constantly put before voters and supported by the Wet press. The Drys naturally looked on this as tenth inning procedure, the game already having been won, and refused to participate.[51]

There were certainly enough opportunities for them to refuse to participate. A large number of unofficial polls were taken, which, Charles Merz noted, was "not surprising."

> Prohibition remained a controversial question before the American people. There was a natural interest in discovering, if possible, what the American people thought about it. The forty-eight states having held only nineteen referendums in eight years,...it was inevitable that private agencies should have been tempted to explore the question somewhat further.[52]

The consequence of the proliferation of polls, coupled with the refusal of many "Drys" to participate, was an impression of rising opposition to prohibition which may have had a strong basis in reality but which could not be determined with precision on the basis of unscientific straw polls. The effect, in the "Dry" view, was described by the Methodist Christian Century:

> Much of the vague dissatisfaction with [the present law] has been generated by exaggerated reports of the degree of active dissatisfaction. John Citizen might be inclined to think, for his own part, that prohibition is a pretty good thing. But being daily informed that millions of the best people are up in arms against it, and that practically nobody favors it except the bootleggers and the Methodist board, he inclines to the opinion that perhaps after all it had better be modified or repealed.
>
> Then comes the poll. And even if it is conducted with perfect fairness, the most it can tell us is not how many people are opposed to prohibition, but how many have been persuaded that so many others are opposed to it and that it will not work.... Our guess would be that nine out of every ten who vote against the present law in a newspaper

> poll are not expressing their opposition to prohibition on principle but their impression--gained from reading the papers--that the opposition is so formidable that enforcement is impossible.[53]

Central to this critique of the role of the press and of press straw polls was the view, frequently and fervidly expressed, that the "positively and unremittingly wet" metropolitan press was fabricating a "pseudo-crisis," a misleading impression that prohibition was a failure and was completely negative in its impact on the nation. Said Christian Century:

> By all the subtleties of newspaper propaganda--cartoons, headlines, "playing up" and "playing down" news--this picture is etched on the minds of the public until hundreds of thousands of citizens who would, if asked, indignantly repudiate the suggestion that they might be victimized by newspaper distortion do, as a matter of fact, take the picture as true and so drift into the wet ranks.[54]

Decrying this as "the essence of yellow journalism," it linked press coverage and press polls in this manner: the press creates the crisis; the journalistic poll is undertaken as a means of finding out what's going on (and as a means of capitalizing on the pseudo-crisis "for subscription purposes"); the poll results are themselves, then, given sensational coverage, further intensifying the situation. Thus, "Anti-prohibition journalism and the journalistic poll together constitute one double-action, compensating, self-feeding racket."[55]

Given the partisan nature of this critique of the polls, it is useful to seek other informed and calmer views relating to the impact of the polls, particularly those of Literary Digest. This can be done by considering them in the light of Claude Robinson's findings. The Digest's sample was biased, he stated, and these biases "operated to color the returns in favor of the Wets." Although "the three...polls do reflect growth of repeal sentiment,... the degree of precision with which this change is measured is uncertain."[56] The problem, however, is that these shortcomings and uncertainties were

apparently not so obvious to those many Americans unlearned in regard to poll reliability. The polls may have been biased in favor of the "wets," and they may have exaggerated the degree of "wet" sentiment, but, given the reputation of Literary Digest polls, they were apparently widely thought to be accurate in their assessment of public opinion. And, as one historian recently stated, "what people thought was happening with national prohibition proved at least as important as what actually took place."[57]

DISCUSSION

The impact of the Literary Digest polls on public perceptions of what was happening with prohibition may be assessed by considering the question in the light of recent emphases in mass communications research on the effects of media. One concept useful in this assessment is that of agenda-setting, which posits that the media influence people's awareness and information about issues (which contributes to attitude-formation), telling them not what to think but what to think about and leading them to attach importance to issues. The media do this by covering some issues while ignoring others and by emphasizing certain issues.[58] One recent work linked this concept to polls and media coverage of polls, stating that "pollsters and the mass media influence politics and public policy by purporting to tell Americans and their leaders what Americans are thinking about and thinking."[59]

The evidence available in the pages of Literary Digest, in contemporary press reports and commentary, and in the works of scholars who have studied prohibition strongly suggests that the Digest's prohibition polls were, at the least, influential in structuring people's perceptions about the prohibition issue, if only by means of the strength of the impression they conveyed that it remained an active, unsettled issue on the public agenda.[60] Combined with

the heavy and cumulatively negative press coverage accorded prohibition and with the actual defects in the policy of national prohibition, the Digest polls contributed to the creation of the climate of opinion in which repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment became a practical possibility. The national prohibition effort might have worked, Frederick Lewis Allen observed in 1931, "if it had had the concerted backing of public opinion."[61] That it didn't may be attributed in some measure to the influence of the overall performance of the press, of which the Digest polls were a significant part, in shaping public opinion.

NOTES

[1]Quoted in Charles Merz, The Dry Decade (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1931), p. 51.

[2]William E. Dever, "Get at the Facts," Atlantic 138 (October 1926): 518.

[3]Herbert Asbury, The Great Illusion: An Informal History of Prohibition (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1950), p. 317

[4]Reprinted in Literary Digest, 18 November 1922, p. 12.

[5]Reese Cleghorn, "ABC News, Meet the Literary Digest," Detroit Free Press, 31 October 1980, p. 10A.

[6]"Digest Digested," Time, 23 May 1938, p. 46; Frank Luther Mott, A History of American Magazines, Vol. IV: 1885-1905 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 579. Mott provides a detailed sketch of the magazine, pp. 569-579.

[7]Quoted in Theodore Peterson, Magazines in the Twentieth Century, 2nd ed. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 155.

[8]Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (New York: Atheneum, 1972), pp. 132, 133; Peterson, p. 152.

[9]"Who Reads the Literary Digest?" Literary Digest, 18 November 1922, p. 48; "Special Polls Shows Teachers Dry, Lawyers Wet," Literary Digest, 3 May 1930, p. 6. In their study of Muncie, Indiana, the Lynds found that 44 percent of the "business-class" families took the magazine, but only 7 percent of workers' families. Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd, Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), p. 240. Arthur E. Bostwick, A Life With Men and Books (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1939), p. 156.

[10]Peterson, p. 154; "The Huge Poll's Final Report: All Records Undone," Literary Digest, 24 May 1930, p. 8.

[11]"Who Reads the Literary Digest?" p. 48; advertisement, Literary Digest, 22 March 1930, p. 3. Its circulation guarantee at the time was 1,400,000.

[12]Quoted in "'Wets' and 'Drys' in the Digest's Prohibition Poll," Literary Digest, 26 August 1922, p. 10.

[13]"The Huge Poll's Final Report: All Records Undone," Literary Digest, 24 May 1930, p. 9.

[14] "First Returns in the Digest's Nation-Wide Poll," 15 July 22, p. 5.

[15]Quoted in Robert T. Elson, Time, Inc.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise, 1923-1941 (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 8. Luce and Hadden used the Digest in their prospectus as the model of what their magazine would not be.

[16]Paul A. Carter, Another Part of the Twenties (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 192.

[17]Mott, p. 577; Peterson, pp. 153-154; Elson, p. 340; "To Our Readers," Literary Digest, 10 July 1937, p. 3; Digested Digest," Time, 28 June 1937, p. 40; "Digest Without Polls," Time, 25 October 1937, p. 71; "Digest Suspended," Time, 7 March 1938, p. 55; "77B," Time, 28 March 1938, p. 44; "Digest Digested," Time, 23 May 1938, pp. 45-46.

[18]Bostwick, p. 162.

[19]William C. Capel, "Polls and the Birth of a Myth," Quill, July 1966, pp. 22-23; Mott, p. 577; Peterson, p. 155. For further discussion of that poll and its impact, see Philip Meyer, Precision Journalism, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 144-145; and George Gallup and Saul Forbes Rae, The Pulse of Democracy: The Public-Opinion Poll and How It Works (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), pp. 41-49.

[20]William Albig, Modern Public Opinion (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), p. 181.

[21]Meyer, p. 144; Boorstin, p. 236.

[22]Claude E. Robinson, Straw Votes: A Study of Political Prediction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), pp. 47, 49. Robinson, who had the cooperation of the magazine's executives in his research, provides, by far, the most information and analysis of any single source on Literary Digest polls. The prohibition polls are examined in pp. 147-170.

[23]Albig, p. 182.

[24]For some of the history of journalistic straw polls prior to Literary Digest's, see Robinson, pp. 46-51, and Charles W. Roll Jr. and Albert H. Cantril, Polls: Their Use and Misuse in Politics (New York: Basic Books, 1972), pp. 5-11. Robinson goes back only as far as the late nineteenth century; Roll and Cantril go back to 1824.

[25]Robinson, p. 51.

[26]New York Times, 9 October 1924, quoted in Robinson, pp. 80-81.

[27]"Women in the Poll--A Triumphant Test," Literary Digest, 9 April 1932, p. 9. Peterson, p. 155, reports that the 1932 prohibition poll gained the magazine 70,000 new subscribers at a time when it needed them.

[28]Quoted, Literary Digest, 12 August 1922, p. 6.

[29]"Kansas the Lone Camel in a 24-State Round-up," Literary Digest, 5 March 1932, p. 6.

[30]"A National Vote on Prohibition and the Bonus," Literary Digest, 8 July 1922, p. 9; "The Huge Poll's Final Report," Literary Digest, 24 May 1930, p. 9.

[31]"Another Hugh 20,000,000-Vote Prohibition Poll," Literary Digest, 13 February 1932, p. 5.

[32]"Dixie Medium Dry in a Two Million Poll Count," Literary Digest, 5 April 1932, p. 8; "The Digest's 20,000,000-Vote Prohibition Poll," Literary Digest, 8 March 1930, p. 5; "Deadly to the Morale of a Minority Party," New York World, 27 November 1928, p. 11.

[33]Eugene Thwing, letter, New York Times, 8 March 1930, p. 16.

[34]Quoted, "Drys and Damps Creep Up in a 2,516,072 Total," Literary Digest, 12 April 1930, p. 8.

[35]Robinson, pp. 55-56.

[36]Robinson, pp. 56-57.

[37]Robinson, pp. 86-96, 170-171. See also Albig, p. 180, and Gallup and Rae, pp. 39, 44-48.

[38]See Capel, pp. 22-23; Gallup and Rae, pp. 43-55; "What Went Wrong With the Polls?" Literary Digest, 14 November 1936, pp. 7-8. Peter V. K. Funk, son of Wilfred J. Funk, who was editor of the Digest in 1936, stated recently that his father had wanted to lessen the use of telephone listings for the poll. "R. J. Cuddihy [the publisher] insisted on the type of poll that the Digest conducted. My father told us repeatedly that the concept of using a telephone poll was an egregious error, for only the relatively wealthy could afford one.... Privately he predicted a landslide for Roosevelt." Letter, Peter V. K. Funk to the author, 16 March 1981. Mott, however, states that the telephone lists "were largely discarded" in 1936. He cites a memorandum from Wilfred J. Funk as the source of this information. Mott, p. 577.

[39]"A National Vote on Prohibition and the Bonus," Literary Digest, 8 July 1922, p. 9.

[40]Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; Perennial Library, 1964), pp. 204-205.

[41]Allen, p. 204.

[42]"First Returns in the Digest's Nation-Wide Poll," Literary Digest, 15 July 1922, p. 6.

[43]George MacAdam, "Counting Noses, Wet and Dry," New York Times, 20 Aug. 1922, Sec. 7, p. 3.

[44]"The Hugh Poll's Final Report: All Records Outdone," Literary Digest, 24 May 1930, pp. 7-8.

[45]"Special Polls Show Teachers Dry, Lawyers Wet," Literary Digest, 3 May 1930, pp. 5-6.

[46]"Statesmen Scurry as the Poll Hits 3,040,036," Literary Digest, 26 March 1932, p. 5.

[47]"The Great Prohibition Poll's Final Report," Literary Digest, 30 April 1932, p. 6.

[48]Quoted, "Testing Prohibition with Straw Votes," Literary Digest, 3 April 1926, p. 7.

[49]See, for example, statements by Wayne B. Wheeler, Anti-Saloon leader, in the 29 July 1922 issue of Literary Digest, p. 6, and by Christian Century, quoted in the 2 September 1922 issue of Literary Digest, p. 13. Also, letter to the editor, New York Times, 30 March 1932, p. 12.

[50]See Francis Scott McBride, "Prohibition After Eight Years: Is It Succeeding or Failing?--I. The Official View of the Anti-Saloon League," Current History 28 (April 1928): 2; "Wet Polls--Another Racket," Christian Century 47 (May 7, 1930): 583.

[51]Ernest Gordon, The Wrecking of the Eighteenth Amendment (Francetown, N.H.: Alcohol Information Press, 1943), p. 127. See his comment on the 1936 Landon-Roosevelt poll: "The ludicrous miscalculation of the Landon-Roosevelt vote for 1936 by the Literary Digest was followed by its demise. Drys had stopped taking it and its value as propagandist in guise of political weather-prophet was at an end." Gordon, p. 143.

[52]Merz, p. 223. See also, MacAdam, p. 3; "College Student Drinking Since Prohibition," Literary Digest, 10 July 1926, pp. 30-31; "The Sentiment for Prohibition," Outlook 140 (26 August 1925): 578-579; Charles Stelzle, "What America Thinks About Prohibition," World's Work 55 (January 1928): 282-288; "What Do You Think About Prohibition?" Outlook 148 (March 14, 1928 and October 10, 1928): 414-415; 923-927; Samuel Hopkins Adams, "Booze is the Victor," Collier's, 10 October 1925, pp. 8-9; "Iowa Straw Poll Shows Repeal Lead," New York Times, 22 February 1932, p. 5; "Restaurant Men Vote for Beer and Wine," New York Times, 26 May 1930, p. 2; "Fourteen Colleges Cast Big Wet Vote," New York Times, 27 March 1930, p. 19; "Poll Shows Dry Trend," New York Times, 11 March 1930, p. 2.

[53]"Wet Polls--Another Racket," Christian Century, 7 May 1930, p. 582.

[54]"Vanishing Dry Press," Christian Century, 25 February 1931, p. 263. See also, Gordon, pp. 113, 116, 119-120, 135-136; and David E. Kyvig, Repealing National Prohibition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 25-27, 35.

[55]"Wet Polls--Another Racket," Christian Century, 7 May 1930, pp. 581-582; "Vanishing Dry Press," Christian Century, 25 February 1931, p. 263. A letter to the Memphis Commercial Appeal contained more severe criticism: "...as the Literary Digest poll proceeds in its insidious attack on the Prohibition law, it is becoming more apparent each week that the Bible is true when it says, 'Men shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.' The devil has captured the Digest and led it into the camp of the wets." Quoted, Literary Digest, 10 May 1930, p. 9.

[55](cont.) The Christian Century argument foreshadows the view of Boorstin that polls are elements of a particular kind of "pseudo-event" having to do with images of public opinion. See Boorstin, pp. 11-12, 233-235. See also Charles W. Smith Jr., Public Opinion in a Democracy: A Study in American Politics (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1939), p. 394: "In one process [with their own polls, the media] make news, sell it, and whet the popular attitude for more."

[56]Robinson, pp. 162-170. Another contemporary analyst came to a slightly different conclusion, one favoring the reliability of the 1930 results. See Walter F. Willcox, "An Attempt to Measure Public Opinion About Repealing the Eighteenth Amendment," Journal of the American Statistical Association 26 (September 1931): 247-249.

[57]Kyvig, p. 22. See also Andrew Sinclair, Era of Excess: A Social History of the Prohibition Movement (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 313. For a sampling of the various conclusions reached by elements of the press regarding what the poll results showed, see: "Cross-Currents in the Digest's Prohibition Poll," Literary Digest, 12 August 1922, p. 6; "How the Nation Sizes Up the Digest Poll," Literary Digest, 7 June 1930, p. 6; "A Prohibition Straw," New York Times, 17 July 1922, p. 12; "What the Poll Shows," New York Times, 24 May 1930, p. 16; "The Digest Poll," Outlook 155 (28 May 1930): 132; "Prohibition Repeal--Practical Politics," New Republic 63 (11 June 1930): 84-86; and Edward S. Martin, "The Editor's Easy Chair: Regulation, Good and Bad," Harpers 161 (August 1930): 378.

Supporters of prohibition, of course, steadfastly maintained that the positive effects of prohibition were being realized, but the press and propagandists for the "wet" cause ignored the positive and greatly magnified the negative, while greatly underestimating the degree of popular support for prohibition. See James McIntosh, "Prohibition and Sincerity," in Prohibition: Modification of the Volstead Law, comp. Lamar T. Beman (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1927), p. 133; Irving Fisher, Prohibition at Its Worst (New York: Macmillan, 1926), pp. 83-85; Francis Scott McBride, "Prohibition After Eight Years: Is it Succeeding or Failing?--I. The Official View of the Anti-Saloon League," Current History 28 (April 1928): 4; "Wet Polls--Another Racket," Christian Century, 7 May 1930, pp. 581-583; "The Sixteen Million," Christian Century, 14 May 1930, pp. 614-615.

Some recent scholarship has lent support to the validity of the claims of the "drys." See J. C. Burnham, "New Perspectives on the Prohibition 'Experiment' of the 1920s," Journal of Social History 2 (Fall 1968); 51-68; Paul A. Carter, "Prohibition and Democracy: The Noble Experiment Reassessed," Wisconsin Magazine of History 56 (Spring 1973): 189-201; David E. Kyvig, Repealing National Prohibition.

[58]See Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function on the Press," in The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press, ed. Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing, 1977), pp. 1-18

[59]David L. Paletz, et al., "Polls in the Media: Content, Credibility and and Consequence," Public Opinion Quarterly 44 (Winter 1980); 513. See Also Leo Bogart, Silent Politics: Polls and the Awareness of Public Opinion (New York: Wiley, 1972), pp. 3-13.

[60]Prohibitionists often asserted that the prohibition issue would go away if the press stopped covering it. "If the press would say, for a year, nothing about wet or dry, there would be no wet or dry question...." Letter, J. J. Broderick, quoted in "Whims and Oddities of The Digest's Great Poll," Literary Digest, 24 May 1930, p. 47. Journalists, however, disagreed. Noting the effort by a group of prohibition supporters to start a "dry" daily newspaper in New York City, Outlook commented that these "drys" would soon learn that prohibition is in the news because it is newsworthy and would end up opposing it. "That High Dry Paper," Outlook 158 (July 8, 1931): 293.

[61]Allen, p. 208.